

CSCE NEWS RELEASE

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Commission Condemns Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan

**For Immediate Release
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Washington, DC—Today the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe released copies of a letter sent to President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan condemning reported religious persecution and requesting that President Karimov take appropriate steps to bring his country into compliance with the standards on freedom of religion of the Helsinki Accords. The letter, signed by Commission Chairman Senator Alfonse D'Amato (R-C-NY), Co-Chairman Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-NJ), Commissioner Rep. Frank R. Wolf (R-VA) and Rep. Tony P. Hall (D-OH), was a reiteration of and follow-up to a previous letter of November 27, 1996.

Full text of the letter follows:

Dear President Karimov:

We continue to be disturbed by reports of harassment, intimidation, and imprisonment of various religious groups in Uzbekistan, as well as the confiscation of religious publications, in violation of the Helsinki Accords. In our letter of November 27, 1996, we urged you to take immediate steps commensurate with your commitments under the Helsinki Final Act to protect religious liberty. To date, we have had no response to our letter, and over these last months we have watched with dismay the apparent steady erosion of religious liberty in Uzbekistan. We reiterate our call to Uzbekistan to comply with its commitments in the area of religious liberty, as a participating State of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

We have had reports that the Uzbekistan Government has recently confiscated a shipment of 24,960 Bibles. The reasons for the confiscation, reportedly given by the Ministry of Justice, are that the Bibles are printed in the Uzbek language and therefore are considered a "missionary activity." As a participating State in the OSCE, Uzbekistan has agreed to respect the right of believers to acquire and

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The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe by law monitors and encourages progress in implementing the provisions of the Helsinki Accords. The Commission, created in 1976, is made up of nine Senators, nine Representatives and one official each from the Departments of State, Commerce and Defense. For more information about the Commission, please call (202) 225-1901.

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use sacred books *in the language of their choice*. In addition, religious organizations have the right to produce, import and disseminate religious publications and materials. [See the Vienna Concluding Document, Sections 16.9 and 16.10] The Uzbekistan Government's confiscation of these Bibles from the Uzbek Bible Society is a clear violation of these Helsinki commitments.

We continue to receive reports that religious groups are targeted for harassing lawsuits and intimidation by Uzbek security forces. In May, a trial was held for Pastor Rashid Turibayev, pastor of the Karakalpak Full Gospel Christian Church. He faces a possible three year sentence for leading "illegal church services" in violation of Article 217 of the Criminal Code. Reports indicate that he was held in a psychiatric hospital for a month without explanation. The lawsuit appears to stem from the fact that the church has been denied registration by the Ministry of Justice because of "missionary activities." Uzbekistan, in section 16.3 of the Vienna Concluding Document, has committed to grant legal status to religious communities to practice their faith. Uzbekistan has also affirmed the right of the individual to freedom of expression, including the right to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authorities. [Copenhagen Concluding Document, Section 9.1] This right covers all communication, whether political, philosophical, or religious in nature.

Mr. President, there was a period last year when it seemed that Uzbekistan was heading toward greater liberalization. The failure of that expectation has been a major disappointment, which has not gone unnoticed in the U.S. Congress. The increasingly frequent reports of harassment of religious communities are compounding the overall impression that Uzbekistan does not take seriously its commitments under the Helsinki Accords. We urge you to take immediate steps commensurate with these commitments that reflect democratic values in a free society.

We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Christopher H. Smith, M.C.
Co-Chairman

Frank R. Wolf, M.C.
Commissioner

Alfonse D'Amato, U.S.S.
Chairman

Tony P. Hall
Member of Congress